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Rebecca A. Umland
University of Nebraska, Kearney

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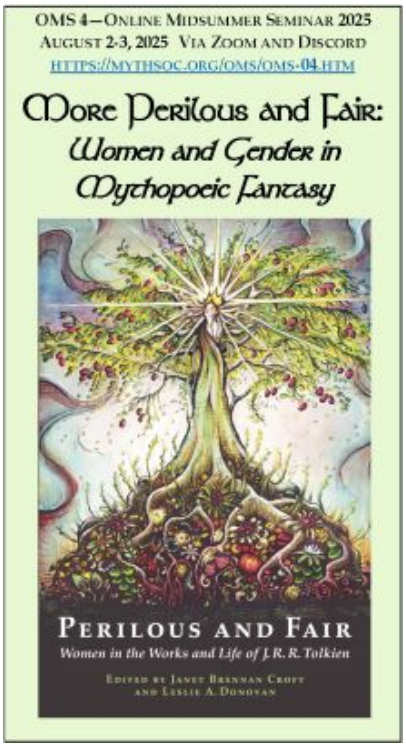

Mythopoesis in Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*

Abstract

This essay examines mythopoesis in Tennyson's *Idylls of the King.* This epic Arthurian poem includes features of the futuristic and fantasy genres and confounds linear time. The poet creates an imaginary geography—one steeped in history and myth—for the arrival and departure of his remarkable hero, Arthur. Moreover, through the mythopoesis of his epic poem, Tennyson's King is more than human, differing in both degree and kind from his knights. The bookend poems that open and close the combined *Idylls* represent two of Tennyson's boldest departures from the received legend that emerged out of the Middle Ages.

Additional Keywords

Alfred Lord Tennyson; Idylls of the King; Tennyson, Alfred Lord. Idylls of the King—Characters—Arthur; Arthurian myth in literature; Celtic mythology—Influence on literature

Mythopoesis in Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*

Rebecca A. Umland

In the 19th-century, when fantasy and futuristic fiction began to flourish, popular writers who first come to mind might be French novelist Jules Verne (1828-1905) with his *Journey to the Center of the Earth* (1864) and *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas* (1870) or British writer H. G. Wells (1866-1946), whose iconic texts include *The Time Machine* (1895) and *The War of the Worlds* (1898). We might even think of Mark Twain (1835-1910), whose 1889 *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* has generated an entire subgenre of Arthurian time-travel films.[1] An artist who may not immediately emerge, but who also belongs in this tradition, is England's poet laureate, Alfred Lord Tennyson (1809-1892). Like these contemporaries—Verne, Wells, and Twain—Tennyson was a visionary who intuited that the nineteenth century represented a liminal space between a remote, nostalgic past and a future of both undetermined marvels and menaces. Enchanted by the past and intent on composing an Arthurian poem of epic proportion, Tennyson was also fascinated with the future, predicting space flight, and perhaps a distant utopian world. His propensity to see into the past and future, along with his felicity of expression and cognitive power, contributes to the *strangeness* of Tennyson's poetry, a quality critic Owen Barfield, sometimes identified as the "fourth Inkling," finds laudable. He observes: "The element of strangeness in beauty […] arises from contact with a different kind of *consciousness* from our own, different, yet not so remote that we cannot partly share it, as indeed, in such a connection, the word 'contact' implies. Strangeness, in fact, arouses wonder when we do not understand: aesthetic imagination when we do" (177). Despite his poet laureate role from 1850 until his death in 1892 that required him to serve as the official voice of England, Tennyson's poetry possesses this unique quality of combined strangeness and beauty.

[1] This novel was first adapted to the stage, and then to the screen. It has generated dozens of film versions, from early cinema to the present, with protagonists of varied ages, ethnicities, and genders. See "The Arthurian Legend as Intertextual Collage" in Umland and Umland.

This essay considers how his *Idylls of the King*, twelve poems first published serially between 1859-1885 and then finally as an epic whole, includes features of the futuristic and fantasy genres. First, while Tennyson does not employ the motif of time travel in the usual sense, he does find portals into the past and future, conflating or confounding linear time. He also creates an imaginary topography—one steeped in history and myth—for the arrival and departure of his remarkable hero, Arthur. Moreover, through the mythopoesis of his epic poem, Tennyson's King is more than human. The Arthurian legend from its inception has been mythopoeic; it is this flexibility, coupled with its "fixed" core" as James Douglas Merriman asserts in his chapter, "The Essential Arthurian Story," that allows for its revitalization and perpetual popularity (21-29.). The bookend poems that open and close the combined *Idylls* represent two of Tennyson's boldest departures from the received legend that emerged out of the Middle Ages, largely through the work of Sir Thomas Malory. In "The Coming of Arthur" one version of Arthur's origin story is mythopoeic—he is not born but "sent," on "a night / In which the bounds of heaven and earth were lost" (l. 370-1), from a strange ship "Bright with a shining people on the decks" (l. 375). In the final idyll, "The Passing of Arthur," as Arthur's vessel recedes into the horizon, Bedivere hears "Sounds, as if some fair city were one voice / Around a king returning from his wars" (ll. 460-61). The opening and closing poems of the *Idylls,* then, intimate that Arthur is from the future, born before his time and returning to the mystery of the deep. He is different not only in degree but also in kind to other men, a distinction Tennyson himself recognized.[2]

Tennyson saw both fore and aft, and in his Arthurian *Idylls* past and future merge. Its setting is medieval, reaching even farther back to ancient myths of Atlantis, and at the same time addressing Victorian topical issues. Yet Arthur comes from the future, or at least the mystery of the "deep" beyond time and space. Along with a nostalgic yearning for the past, Tennyson also anticipated the new. He embraced innovative technology—his voice is on early wax cylinder recordings, and he invited his neighbor on the Isle of Wight, Julia Margaret Cameron, to create a series of photographic illustrations for an 1870s compilation of the existing *Idylls.* As early as 1842, in the poem, "Locksley Hall," he envisioned future aircraft travel and imagined a progressive world government:

[2] Hallam Tennyson comments: "[M]y father thought that perhaps he had not made the real humanity of the King sufficiently clear in his epilogue; so he inserted in 1891, as his last correction, 'ideal manhood closed in real man'" (V. II 129). The line referred to is in "To the Queen," which follows the final idyll.

> For I dipt into the future, far as human eye could see;
> Saw the Vision of the world, and all the wonder that would be;
>
> Saw the heavens fill with commerce, argosies of magic sails,
> Pilots of the purple twilight dropping down with costly bales;
>
> [. . .]
>
> Till the war-drum throbb'd no longer, and the battle-flags were furl'd
> In the Parliament of man, the Federation of the world.
> ("Locksley Hall")

Finally, "The Enoch Arden Law" is named after Tennyson's 1864 narrative poem, *Enoch Arden*, which is also the literary foundation story of an entire cinematic subgenre.[3] To appreciate Tennyson's affinity with science fiction and fantasy in the *Idylls'* peculiar treatment of time and the hero, it is helpful to explore how the present, past, and future inform his visionary Camelot.

SHAPING THE *IDYLLS*: TENNYSON AND HIS CONTEMPORARIES

The Victorians occupy a precarious place between the past and future. What distinguishes them from their high romantic predecessors is that the divide between past and present for poets like Wordsworth was primarily created by the inevitable transition from childhood to adulthood, but for the Victorians the chasm was not only a result of the natural process of aging, but also of a keen sense that the ideal of an earlier era was vanishing rapidly. The shift from an agrarian past to an urban sprawl, the implications of Darwinism and its threat to traditional religious beliefs, the way time itself began to accelerate through innovations like rail travel, are examples of how writers such as Tennyson encountered both a personal and cultural divide between past and present. Little wonder that the question mark of the future fostered a nostalgic urge to retreat into the past, even as it instilled a qualified hope of moving past the uncertainty of the present.

Two factors about Tennyson's position in the Victorian age that especially informed his conception and composition of *Idylls of the King* are worth noting. First, from early in his career, he entertained a particular interest in writing a sustained Arthurian work but was discouraged by a general critical

[3] From straight transpositions in early silent cinema, the motif of the stranded spouse who returns unexpectedly enjoyed comic cinematic success from the 1940s through 1960s, and more recent serious treatments in films like *Cast Away* (2000), starring Tom Hanks. See Umland, "Presumed Dead."

consensus that he should address contemporary subjects. Deterred by reviewers of his earlier works, Tennyson hesitated in moving forward with his desire to write his epic Arthurian poem. Of "The Holy Grail" idyll, Hallam Tennyson quotes his father: "Many years ago, I did write 'Lancelot's Quest of the Grail' in as good verses as I ever wrote, no, I did not write, I made them in my head" (V.I 457).[4] Clyde de L. Ryals discusses how Tennyson addressed this difficulty, how he wrestled with the problem of making the past an appealing subject for his readers: in other words, how to contemporize his characters and narrative by making them recognizably Victorian, and by addressing the "condition of England" questions that included the role of women, the importance of social stability and inspired leadership, the need to believe in something good and great.[5]

This conflict is the subject of his 1842 poem, "The Epic." Tennyson, ever sensitive to negative reviews of his work, presents the obstacles to his Arthurian ambitions. The main argument is "that a truth / Looks freshest in the fashion of the day […] / Why take the style of those heroic times?" These were real objections voiced repeatedly by reviews of his early verse like "The Lady of Shalott," especially those of critic John Sterling (Ryals 21). Ryals notes that Tennyson also experimented with form, settling on the "idyll" as an effective "little epic" in which each poem could stand alone but could later be combined with others to become a "cyclic epic" (Ryals 33). He also composed early on several short narrative poems using Arthurian topics to increase his audience's taste for the *Matter of Britain*, allowing him to pursue his Arthurian ambitions.[6] Of the poet's sources for his poem, Hallam Tennyson remarks:

[4] In *From the Great Deep* (1967), Clyde de L. Ryals remarks: "So here he was with a desire and indeed a plan for writing a long poem on the Arthurian legend. 'I had it all in mind, and could have done it without trouble,' his son reports him as saying. 'When I was twenty-four […] I meant to write a whole great poem on it [Arthurian legend]'" (22).

[5] John Boorman comments: "Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, for instance, or Burne-Jones and the Pre-Raphaelites described and painted the twelfth-century Arthurian tales in terms of their era. And they ended by telling you more about the Victorian age than about the legend" (qtd. in Pelan).

[6] Charles Thomas comments on Tennyson's influence in his own time, but also the impact of his Arthurian epic and the setting of his last idyll: "Tennyson's readership was vast. It extended through every class of society, and the influence of his treatment of the Arthurian cycle has been particularly felt in Cornwall; one entire village (Tintagel) derives a fair income from the association. As for the notion of Lyonesse, though there can be no suggestion that Tennyson invented this, he found it, enriched it, altered its direction, and provided the Isles of Scilly with a completely new literary dimension" (265).

> On Malory, and later, on Lady Charlotte Guest's translation of the *Mabinogion*, and on his own imagination, my father said that he chiefly founded his epic; he has made the old legends his own, restored the idealism, and infused into them a spirit of modern thought and an ethical significance, setting his characters in a rich and varied landscape; as indeed otherwise these archaic stories would not have appealed to the modern world at large. (V.II 121-22)

A second point related directly to the Victorian present is Tennyson's conception of Arthur, which embraces the "great man theory" propagated by Thomas Carlyle in his series of lectures, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (1840-1841) that posits history is largely determined by exceptional individuals. In the *Idylls* the spiritual and cognitive divide between Arthur and his fellow knights turns out to be so great that the king is portrayed as futuristic and strange—surreal or dreamlike—but astute readers of Tennyson's time would have understood how the mythic king was also an embodiment of the Carlylean "great man." This affinity is so close that in *Carlyle and Tennyson,* Michael Timko asserts: "If one wishes to understand the Victorian period, one needs to know the work of Carlyle and Tennyson […] why they made such an impression on their age and just how lasting this impression was" (xi). The men and women who inhabit Tennyson's Camelot, and the forces that disrupt its harmony, though medieval in sentiment, setting and attire, are in fact recognizably Victorian. Arthur alone belongs to the present, and the future past.

TENNYSON AND TIME: PORTALS INTO THE PAST AND FUTURE

L.P. Hartley opens his 1953 novel, *The Go-Between,* with the assertion: "The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there," a sentiment akin to Tennyson's self-declared "passion of the past" and how it works to suspend time. Such a passion was usually invoked by a particular place and its history that served as a portal into the past; if it induced melancholy, Tennyson also believed in its regenerative power.[7] Further, Christopher Ricks observes Tennyson's "haunting intersection of time and the timeless" citing as an example lines from his 1889 poem, "The Ring": "A noise of falling weights that never fell" and "As if perpetual sunset lingered there" (261). One can also discern the influence of Keats here, especially his "Ode on a Grecian Urn" (1819) with its frozen vignettes of lovers panting to receive a kiss not yet enjoyed, an exodus from a village not yet abandoned, its inhabitants *en route* to a sacrifice

[7] Biographer Robert Bernard Martin observes: "All his life Tennyson was haunted by what he called the 'passion of the past', the regret for a better world irretrievably gone, while at the same time he was aware that the immediate past of his own ancestry was a dark one, throwing its shadow over the present into his own life" (1).

not yet offered. This liminal space between an impending event and its completion also knits together past and future and aspires to the sublime in poetry. As critic Harold Bloom remarks in "The Art of Reading Poetry": "Loftiness is a quality that emanates from the realm of aspiration, from what Wordsworth called a sense of something evermore *about to be"* (21). Tennyson's moments that suspend time, and the recollection of an intensely passionate engagement with the past, also resembles Wordsworth's concept of "spots of time" and the composition of poetry as the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; it takes it origin from emotion recollected in tranquility" as he elucidates it in his "Preface" to the *Lyrical Ballads* (608).

Of Arthur, Merlin riddles: "and where is he who knows / From the great deep to the great deep he goes" ("The Coming of Arthur" 410-11). "The deep," a favored concept of Tennyson's is, of course, outside of time—both a place of pre-existence and a post-death reality. Tennyson's metaphor that life is a "tableland" flanked by a watery deep on either side is a concept anticipated in Wordsworth's "Intimations" ode (1802-1807):

> Hence, in a season of calm weather
> Though inland far we be,
> Our Souls have sight of that immortal sea
> Which brought us hither
> Can in a moment travel thither
> And see the Children sport upon the shore
> And hear the mighty waters rolling evermore.
> (*Ode: Intimations of Immortality* Stanza IX)

The dark undercurrent of time, and a water journey to and from the immortal realm in Wordsworth's ode also informs Tennyson's poems, especially Arthur's arrival and departure.

Tennyson's imagined world of past and future is another way the poet neutralizes time and place, a recurrent motif in science fiction and fantasy. For instance, in George Lucas's 1977 *Star Wars* with its opening crawl, "A long time ago in a galaxy far far away," we must ask: Where *are* we in such a world, or rather *when* are we? Galactic warfare and advanced weaponry commingle with feudalism, ancient hermit sages, and advancement through a rigorous *askesis* that prepares a Jedi knight for "his destiny." John Boorman's *Excalibur* (1981) grew out of his earlier screenplay of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, adapted with Rospo Pallenberg. The latter says of *Excalibur* that the visual image at its end when Arthur is borne away by the maidens on the barge was borrowed from the scripted closing of the earlier *Rings* screenplay when "Bilbo and company leave the shores of Middle-Earth forever. Legolas, watching from the land, remarks upon seeing a rainbow, 'Look—only seven colors. Indeed the world is

failing,'" which is to say, "'We live in a diminished world.' With Arthur also gone, the age of myth and magic in his land has finally passed too" (Pelan). Like Tennyson, Boorman long harbored ambitions to write and film an Arthurian epic but could not secure financial backing until the success of *Star Wars* in 1977, which he avers is Arthurian.

Excalibur features a conciliatory parting of Arthur and Guinevere on the eve of his last battle with Mordred. In a scenario taken from Tennyson's idyll, "Guinevere," Boorman's Arthur visits his queen who has taken refuge in a nunnery; he expresses regret he could not be the husband she needed: "I was not born to live a man's life, but to be the stuff of future memory," he tells her. Camelot represented the flowering of a "Fair Time," but Arthur asserts: "Now once more I must ride with my knights to defend what was and the dream of what could be." The "stuff of future memory"—a moment in a finite present—becomes a remembered past in the future, but also liberation. Arthur confesses to his queen-turned-nun: "I've often thought that in the hereafter of our lives, when I owe no more to the future and can be just a man, we may meet, and you will come to me and claim me as yours and know I am your husband. It is a dream that I have" (1:58:05) a close paraphrase of Tennyson. [8] In the conclusion of *Excalibur,* the moribund king assures his sole surviving knight, Perceval, that one day "a king will come, and the sword will rise again," very like what Tennyson's Arthur tells Bedivere in the final idyll. Boorman said this film chronicles "the past, present, and future of humanity" (qtd. in Pelan) which are all contained in human consciousness. We will also remember the discursive passage from Caxton's Malory after Arthur receives a mortal wound in his strife with Mordred:

> Yet some men say in parts of England that King Arthur is not dead but had by will of our Lord Jesu into another place; and men say that he will come again and he will win the holy cross. I will not say it shall be so, but

[8] Boorman told Philip Strick in an interview he had been trying to make an Arthurian film prior to 1977 but was unable to finance it until after the success of the first *Star Wars* movie in 1977. He commented that *Star Wars* is "a straight transposition of the Arthurian story—Guinness is the Merlin character, Mark Hammill is the boy Arthur suddenly chosen to be King, it's very clear" (Strick 170). Despite the claim in the end credits that *Excalibur* is "Adapted from Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*," (2:17:45), this dialogue in Boorman's film is a very close paraphrase of the following passage from Tennyson's "Guinevere" when Arthur confesses to his queen: "Hereafter in that world where all are pure / We two may meet before high God, and thou / Wilt spring to me, and claim me thine, and know / I am thine husband" (ll. 560-64). The film's conclusion also follows Tennyson rather than Malory in ending with Arthur on the barge rather than with the fate of Lancelot and Guinevere.

> rather will I say: here in this world he changed his life. But men say there is written upon his tomb this verse: "*Hic iacet Arthurus Rex quondam Rexque futurus*". (*Le Morte d'Arthur*)

The final line, usually translated as "Here lies Arthur, once and future king" was putatively carved on Arthur's grave at Bedivere's behest and also serves as the title for T.H. White's novel, *The Once and Future King* (1958), in which Merlin lives backwards in time. Thus, Tennyson's text, like both Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* and White's novel, features the confounding of past and future.

MYTHOPOESIS: ARTHUR'S ORIGIN STORY AND OTHERNESS

From the opening poem of the *Idylls,* it is established that Arthur is from another time and place. First, there is Tennyson's invention of his mythic "coming," an origin story recounted by his half-sister, Bellicent, who learned it from the wizard Bleys. When Uther Pendragon passes away "moaning and wailing for an heir" (l. 367) on "a night / when the bounds of heaven and earth were lost," (ll. 370-71) Merlin and Bleys

> Beheld, so high upon the dreary deeps
> It seem'd in heaven, a ship, the shape thereof
> A dragon wing'd, and all from stem to stern
> Bright with a shining people on the decks,
> And gone as soon as seen.
> ("The Coming of Arthur" ll. 372-76)

Merlin retrieves the infant from the waves, and then he and Bleys observe

> Wave after wave, each mightier than the last,
> Till last, a ninth one, gathering half the deep
> And full of voices, slowly rose and plunged
> Roaring, and all the wave was in a flame;
> And down the wave and in the flame was borne
> A naked babe, and rode to Merlin's feet.
> ("The Coming of Arthur" ll.378-83)

Merlin and the child "were clothed in fire / And presently thereafter follow'd calm" (389-90). In this origin story, Arthur is "sent," a feature of Carlyle's hero but also Tennyson's particular innovation to Arthurian legend.

As king, again following Carlyle and his great man theory, Arthur represents inspired leadership in this world of which Matthew Arnold concludes: "ignorant armies clash by night" ("Dover Beach"). It is also significant that Tennyson specifies the celestial ship as "dragon wing'd" which

certainly references the surname or title "Pendragon" and Uther's heir. Tennyson's employment of the term and the imagery of the dragon associated with his king suggests his interest in returning Arthur to his early Celtic origins (Cornish and Welsh) such as Geoffrey of Monmouth's narrative in his *History of the Kings of Britain* (ca. 1130) and/or as a titular usage or epithet meaning a "war chief" in the Welsh tradition the poet knew well. Tennyson studied multiple versions of early Welsh sources from boyhood on, as Tom Peete Cross elucidates in his article, "Tennyson as a Celticist." Following this tradition is C.S. Lewis's use of the epithet in *That Hideous Strength* (1945), the final novel in his space trilogy, which features Dr. Elwin Ransom as the "Pendragon," Arthur's heir. Tennyson's Arthur is associated throughout the *Idylls* with the emblem of the dragon: in "Lancelot and Elaine" (ll.433-41), "The Holy Grail" (l. 263), "The Last Tournament" (ll. 182, 667-69) and "Guinevere" (ll. 395, 590-94). This underscores the poet's return to an earlier mythos rooted in the lore of West Britain.

Arthur's auspicious mythic arrival in "The Coming of Arthur" is not the only indication he comes from another time and place. In a second account, Bedivere relates the version of Arthur's birth that follows the fixed tradition, a result of Uther's lust for and hasty marriage to the newly widowed Ygerne. Guinevere's father, King Leodogran, asks Queen Bellicent to corroborate Bedivere's account of Arthur's birth:

> And then the Queen made answer: "What know I?
> For dark my mother was in eyes and hair.
> And dark in hair and eyes am I; and dark
> Was Gorloïs; yea, and dark was Uther too,
> Wellnigh to blackness; but this King is fair
> Beyond the race of Britons and of men."
> ("The Coming of Arthur" ll. 325-30)

Notice the assertion of Arthur's otherness, that he is "fair / Beyond the race of Britons *and of men*." In addition to Bellicent's narrative of mystical arrival and Bedivere's account of his birth, Leodogran himself, questioning Arthur's legitimacy before allowing him to wed Guinevere, experiences a dream vision that embodies Arthur's ultimate incompatibility with the earthly realm he makes—he first sees it materialize and grow at the command of "a phantom king, / Now looming and now lost," (ll. 429-30) but then this vision gives way and "the solid earth became / As nothing, but the King stood out in heaven, / Crowned" (ll. 441-43). David Goslee remarks: "What can this dream foreshadow except the fatal incompatibility of Arthur and his realm?" (212). It prefigures Arthur's final recognition of his own precociousness in "The Passing of Arthur."

Other passages likewise establish Arthur's otherness. His singularity is signaled by his emblems of election—Excalibur, inscribed with imperatives on

each side, "Take me," and "Cast me Away" (ll. 302-04) which is also Tennyson's innovation, and The Round Table, his vision incarnate indicating he is a figuration of the artist as well. At its opening and close, "The Coming of Arthur" insists that he "made a realm and reign'd" (ll. 19, 518). When he forms the Round Table, Bellicent sees "From eye to eye thro' all their Order flash / A momentary likeness of the King" (ll. 269-70). Moreover, his order and vision of a perfect world rests on the ancient idea of Pythagorean music of the spheres. Tennyson might have been familiar with the mythology of the "ancient perpetual choirs" that purportedly blesses the British Isles with its celestial song by references to it in a 1796 Welsh triad or by oral lore while visiting Cornwall.

"Gareth and Lynette" continues the idea of divine music with Merlin's paradox that enchanted Camelot is built "To music, therefore never built at all / And therefore built forever" (ll. 272-74). As Michael Bright points out in *Cities Built to Music*, Tennyson "was taken with these myths" of ancient cities being built to music, as evinced in this poem, but others as well— "Amphion," "Ilion, Ilion" and "Tithonus" (83). In "Balin and Balan," Arthur commands the repentant knight Balin: "Rise my true knight […] / walk with me and move / To music with thine Order and the King" (ll. 72-74). Later still, Percival recounts four great zones of sculpture representing an evolutionary hierarchy:

> And in the lowest beasts are slaying men,
> And in the second men are slaying beasts,
> And on the third are warriors, perfect men,
> And on the fourth are men with growing wings,
> And over all one statue in the mould
> Of Arthur, made by Merlin, with a crown,
> And peak'd wings pointed to the Northern Star.
> ("The Holy Grail" ll. 234-40)

Arthur's loftiness, depicted here, echoes Leodogran's earlier vision and reiterates that Arthur differs from others in his very essence, even Galahad, the Grail knight whose claim to the quest is shown at least to be authentic. Finally, in "The Last Tournament," Tristram remembers that upon his first arrival in Camelot, he had thought of "that weird legend of his birth"; he then recalls that Arthur's "foot was on a stool / Shaped as a dragon; he seemed to me no man, / But Michaël trampling Satan" (ll.664-68). In this idyll also Dagonet, Arthur's fool, accuses the adulterous Tristram of breaking the music of the king (ll. 263-66).

TENNYSON'S IMAGINATIVE TOPOGRAPHY: "FROM THE GREAT DEEP TO THE GREAT DEEP HE GOES"

One of Tennyson's more significant reversals of the Arthurian legend presented in Malory and the received tradition from the late Middle Ages is his revision of Arthur's origin and the topographical canvas against which the events unfold. Tom Pete Cross observes: "In a conversation said to have taken place in 1860, Tennyson expressed the conviction that Arthur was an historical personage and that the original scene of his exploits was Cornwall." Moreover, he adds that during the long composition of the *Idylls,* Tennyson made several excursions to west Britain, exploring both Wales and Cornwall: "Especially important are the visits of 1848 and 1860" (488). He submerged himself in the early Celtic textual writings related to Arthur, and local lore kept alive through oral tradition.

With the wild success of the first four idylls in 1859, poems that addressed the role of women in the Victorian social structure—"Enid," "Vivien," "Elaine," and "Guinevere"—he returned to Cornwall in 1860, extending his travels to the archipelago Scilly Isles, searching for the imaginative topography to complete the *Idylls*. Some of the more difficult idylls to conceptualize and write were on his mind; appearing in 1869 were the crucial beginning and ending poems, "The Coming of Arthur," and "The Passing of Arthur," (the last, an extended version of his earlier 1842 "Morte d'Arthur" revised to mirror "The Coming,") as the poet clearly already was contemplating how to move from the "little idyll" concept of self-contained narratives to the "cyclic epic idyll" in which the poems would be arranged to form a complete, unified poem, a revision of the medieval legend. Also among his 1869 collection, *Poems,* were "Pelleas and Ettarre," and the idyll he found most daunting to compose, "The Holy Grail." One of his companions during the 1860 tour, Francis Turner Palgrave, commented "this was, perhaps, specifically entitled to be named Tennyson's Arthurian journey" (H. Tennyson V.I 461). Tennyson indeed did find his inspiration during this expedition to Cornwall and West Britain, some of it from local lore about a sunken Lyonesse, likely from stories circulating among Cornish fishermen. These accounts so impressed the poet that much later (in 1887) while cruising off the coast of Land's End, he reportedly peered into the waters in search of "some ruins of town or castle, parts of the ancient Lyonesse" (Cross 488).

Charles Thomas concludes his *Exploration of a Drowned Landscape: Archaeology and History of the Scilly Isles,* with a chapter, "Tennyson, Arthur, and Lyonesse." In it, he emphasizes the influential role of the *Idylls* in promoting tourism in Cornwall, recognized as the location of Arthur's birth (Tintagel Castle) but also that of the lost land of Lyonesse. While some specialists identify Cornwall's Dozmary Pool, Brodmin Moor, as Tennyson's inspiration for the

mythic Lyonesse in "The Passing of Arthur," Thomas maintains the terrain in the poem matches that of Loe Pool in Cornwall where Bedivere casts Excalibur away, and later, while facing east, where the knight witnesses Arthur's receding barge (265-66). He maintains Tennyson chose this specific location with a "barren bar" situated between a body of fresh water and the sea.[9] In either case, the reliance on a Cornish site for his topography departs from medieval legend which locates this ultimate battle on the south coast of England. Another significant way Tennyson departs from Malory's text is that while the latter concludes with the "dolorous death and departing out of this world" of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere, Tennyson's epic poem ends with the last battle and "passing" of Arthur—his ideal epic hero rooted in a Celtic tradition.

As the *Idylls* progress, flawless Arthur is unable to sustain the standards of his mortal knights of weaker will. Nowhere is this more evident than in the final idyll, "The Passing of Arthur," when Tennyson perfectly fuses past and future, a result of the apocalyptic present—the dissolving of the Round Table through "this last, dim, weird battle of the west" (l. 95) set in the legendary realm of Lyonesse, thought to have been situated between Cornwall and the Scilly Isles. Like Atlantis, the mythic lost land of Lyonesse catastrophically sank into the sea. Tennyson's reappropriation of the last battle, staging it in the far west of Britain and connecting Lyonesse with the legend of Atlantis, along with the way he confounds time, anticipates later works such as Tolkien's unfinished novels, *The Lost Road* and *The Notion Club Papers* (published posthumously but written in 1936 and 1945, respectively) and more recently novelist Stephen Lawhead's *Pendragon* Cycle. The first in Lawhead's series, *Taliesin* (1987) begins

[9] Thomas's evidence for Loe Pool as the place Tennyson had in mind for the setting of Arthur's passing is the passage: "The bold Sir Bedivere uplifted him / And bore him to a chapel nigh the field / A broken chancel with a broken cross / That stood on a dark strait of barren land: / On one side lay the Ocean, and on one / Lay a great water, and the moon was full" ("Passing" ll. 175-80). "The great water is fringed with juts of pointed rock, crags, reeds and bulrush beds, and a margin with many-knotted waterflags. It is *fresh* water, and the dark strait is barren because it consists of pebbles. The side which is not the ocean is a lake or mere" and the death barge departs *eastwards.* "Only one place in Cornwall fulfils these conditions: the remarkable fresh water lake, Loe Pool, on the western shore of the Lizard peninsula. […] The northern side of the Pool near the Bar has low jagged cliffs with pines; there is some vegetation along the water's edge." He adds the bar is "barren" because it is made of pebbles (265-66). It is also interesting that Hallam quotes Palgrave: "Next day a long and pleasant walk took us to Perranporth, a little village on the coast, which here was a stretch of level golden sands, barred at each end by fine rocks. Some way hence, we were directed through a little labyrinth of dunes to the famous buried church of Perranzabuloe. Only a few sand-heaped lines of wall remain. But St. Piran is assigned to the fifth century, and the church might be of Arthur's age if we place him about that period" (Letter dated September 21, 1860; H. Tennyson I. 464-465).

with the sinking of Atlantis and the migration of a remnant band of its people to Lyonesse. *Avalon: The Return of Arthur* (1999) includes the re-emergence of Atlantis as a climactic moment in the plot and features reincarnated Arthurian characters in a modern setting. In Tennyson's *Idylls*, this location punctuates past and future—an era closing at the edge of the world:

> Then rose the King and moved his host by night,
> And ever push'd Sir Modred, league by league,
> Back to the sunset bound of Lyonnesse—
> A land of old upheaven from the abyss
> By fire, to sink into the abyss again;
> Where fragments of forgotten peoples dwelt,
> And the long mountains ended in a coast
> Of ever-shifting sand, and far away
> The phantom circle of a moaning sea.
> ("Passing" ll. 80-88)

In this final poem, both Arthur and Bedivere experience initial confusion as the impending doom of the Round Table approaches. This fatal battle—set in a wintry fog at the edge of the world—prompts Arthur's search for certitude about himself and his calling:

> Nor ever yet had Arthur fought a fight
> Like this last, dim, weird battle of the west.
> A deathwhite mist slept over sand and sea:
> Whereof the chill, to him who breathed it, drew
> Down with his blood, till all his heart was cold
> With formless fear; and ev'n on Arthur fell
> Confusion, since he saw not whom he fought.
> ("Passing" ll. 94-98)

Facing the end of Camelot, he is overwhelmed for a moment with the terrible knowledge that he has been unable to change human nature or to affect a permanent impact on human affairs, completing his understanding of how radically he differs from others. Through human eyes, Arthur has been viewed as "more than man,"—Guinevere insists on this when she says of her husband: "But who can gaze upon the Sun in heaven? / […] He is all fault who hath no fault at all" ("Lancelot and Elaine" ll.123, 132) reiterated later in "Guinevere," "I thought I could not breathe in that fine air / That pure severity of perfect light" (ll. 640-41). At last, he recognizes this also—he is from the future, and the world is ultimately an inhospitable place for the King, even though his visitation helps to propel human history forward, much like Shelley's concept of poets as "the

mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present" (20) in his 1821 essay, *A Defense of Poetry*. Arthur's *anagnorisis*, the self-knowledge of his "otherness," is complete, as he understands: "The old order changeth, yielding place to new / And God fulfils himself in many ways, / Lest one good custom should corrupt the world" ("The Passing of Arthur" ll. 408-10). The concluding lines of Wallace Stevens's 1921 poem "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon" aptly apply to Arthur's mood as he understands this vision of the world emanated from himself alone:

> I was myself the compass of that sea:
>
> I was the world in which I walked, and what I saw
> Or heard or felt came not but from myself;
> And there I found myself more truly and more strange.
> (Stevens)

At the battle's close, Bedivere is compelled to carry out Arthur's final orders, to return Excalibur to its origin (the Lady of the Lake) and to place his liege in the waiting funeral barge. As in "The Coming of Arthur," here the moribund king boards another magical ship which will return him whence he came—the deep. A. Dwight Culler points out that Bedivere, who in "The Coming of Arthur" narrates the quotidian account of Arthur's birth, and in this last his passing, has in fact witnessed a complete mythic cycle:

> Coming out of the great deep and returning to the great deep again, he illustrates the eternal recurrence and is a kind of symbol of the dying god. Tennyson has made this clear in many ways, primarily by the topography of the poem, in which the narrow strait of barren land, which is the symbol of life in this world, is flanked by the twin mysteries of Birth and Death. (Culler 102)

Bedivere laments his own alienation from what he believes to be a dying world: "And I, the last, go forth companionless, / And the days darken round me, and the years, / Among new men, strange faces, other minds" ("The Passing of Arthur" ll. 404-406), though it is important to observe the poem opens with a jump in time; the story Bedivere relates is "In the white winter of his age, to those / With whom he dwelt, new faces, other minds" (ll. 4-5)—no longer, in his advanced years, finding the world in which he now dwells occupied by "new men" or "strange faces" but a softened conflation of "new faces" that nonetheless represent "other minds" than those of the old order.

This estrangement that both Arthur and Bedivere experience is a feature that permeates Tennyson's poetry. The alienation in this final idyll is

anticipated by that of Ulysses's men in the earlier poem, "The Lotos-Eaters" (1832-1833) and by Ulysses himself in the poem named after him—a feeling often expressed in texts in which the inhabited world becomes defamiliarized, inhospitable, strange. In "The Lotos-Eaters," Ulysses's men, on their post-Troy voyage, speaking their "Choric Song" in one voice, express their fear of dispossession should they return to Ithaka:

> For surely now our household hearths are cold,
> Our sons inherit us: our looks are strange:
> And we should come like ghosts to trouble joy.
> […]
> There *is* confusion worse than death,
> Trouble on trouble, pain on pain,
> Long labour unto aged breath,
> Sore task to hearts worn out by many wars
> And eyes grown dim with gazing on the pilot-stars."
>
> ("The Lotos-Eaters" Stanza VI)

A similar anxiety plagues the Greek hero himself in the 1842 poem, "Ulysses" when, after his return from Troy laments: "I mete and dole / Unequal laws unto a savage race, / That hoard, and sleep, and feed, and know not me" (l. 3-5) prompting his departure on the ultimate journey that is, as Culler recognizes "a voyage into […] all that is shadowy either in this world or the next. It is certainly a voyage into Death, for all Romantic heroes, from Werther on, have known that this is the ultimate experience" (97). In "Enoch Arden," (1864) the titular hero, a husband and father shipwrecked for ten years before returning to find himself displaced by his best friend, chooses not to disclose his return. He welcomes death as a release from sorrow and envisions his translation to heaven as a re-enactment of his earlier rescue:

> There came so loud a calling of the sea,
> That all the houses in the haven rang.
> He woke, he rose, he spread his arms abroad
> Crying with a loud voice 'a sail! a sail!
> I am saved'; and so fell back and spoke no more.
>
> ("Enoch Arden")

Ulysses, his Lotos-Eater companions, and Enoch all find attractive oblivion via death by water. However, "The Lotos-Eaters" and "Ulysses" both stop short of the imminent annihilation of the voyagers, serving as examples of suspended time—what Ricks calls the "haunting intersection of time and the timeless"—the Lotos-Eaters anticipate their death, but the poem concludes

before this occurs, as Ulysses's voyage (from which he knows there is no return) is only about to commence when the poem ends. Conversely, there is resolution rather than suspension for both Enoch and Arthur and their end is salvific. Tennyson's belief in death as a form of progress is mirrored in the imminent return of Arthur, the dying god, to the realm from which he came, and if he is indeed healed of his "grievous wound" on the island-valley of Avilion ("The Passing of Arthur" l. 432) he will also come again.[10]

In the sublime closing image of the *Idylls*, Bedivere seeks and finds solace in Arthur's departure:

> Then from the dawn it seem'd there came but faint
> As from beyond the limit of the world,
> Like the last echo born of a great cry,
> Sounds, as if some fair city were one voice
> Around a king returning from his wars.
> ("Passing" ll. 457-61)

At last, straining for one last glimpse of the barge he saw, "Or thought he saw, the speck that bare the King," as it receded,

> Down that long water opening on the deep
> Somewhere far off, pass on and on, and go
> From less to less and vanish into light.
> And the new sun rose bringing the new year.
> ("Passing" ll. 465-69)

The cyclic year that began on New Year's Eve with Arthur's "coming," is fulfilled in the heart of winter, on the same day, with his "passing."

Tennyson insisted: "Birth is a mystery and death is a mystery, and in the midst lies the tableland of life […]. It is not the history of one man or of one generation but of a whole cycle of generations" (H. Tennyson V. II 127). Hallam Tennyson adds to this idea when he observes that in the *Idylls*, "the author has carefully shadowed forth the spiritual progress and advance of the world" (II.128). Tennyson's mythopoesis—from his invention of Arthur's preternatural arrival through his imaginative topography of Arthur's final battle and return to the mysterious deep—insists that his king from the medieval past is also of

[10] Hallam Tennyson asserts of his father's *Idylls* and its conclusion: "Yet in spite of the ebbs and flows in the tide of human affairs, in spite of the temporary bearing down of the pure and lofty purpose, the author has carefully shadowed forth the spiritual progress and advance of the world, and has enshrined man's highest hopes in this new-old legend, crowning with a poet's prophetic vision the vague and disjointed dreams of a bygone age" (V. II 128).

the future, even as his *entourage* is recognizably Victorian. Tennyson wrought his Arthurian world from collective memory and his own singular vision, imparting in it a hope for the future in what is timeless and good. Despite his strangeness, Arthur is sent from a celestial realm to body forth a "fair time" that temporarily "greens in its own resplendence," to borrow a phrase from a poem by Don Welch, "There is No Wind in Heaven." Tennyson's storied king then returns to "the deep," the mystery of the future past upon which fantasy and myth so often rest, to await his calling in suspended time and space.

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About the Author

Rebecca A. Umland is a professor of English at the University of Nebraska at Kearney. She has coauthored two books with Samuel J. Umland, *The Use of Arthurian Legend in Hollywood Film* and *Donald Cammell: A Life on the Wild Side*. She has published book chapters and articles on Arthurian Legend in Literature and Film, on Myth, and on World Cinema, including a book, *Outlaw Heroes as Liminal Figures of Film and Television.*